

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 085 759

CS 200 955

AUTHOR Johnson, Ted
TITLE Using Film in the Classroom.
PUB DATE Nov 71
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (61st, Las Vegas, November 1971)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Audiovisual Communication; Communication (Thought Transfer); Content Analysis; Educational Improvement; Educational Innovation; English Instruction; *Film Production; *Film Study; Instructional Media; Secondary Education; Teaching Methods; *Visual Literacy

ABSTRACT

Over ten years ago, in a report on the process of education, Jerome Bruner dealt with the advantages of using film and other audiovisual materials. First he said that film can help use and develop attention. Secondly, he identified film as one of the "devices for vicarious experience." He said that film can be used as a dramatizing device, as a tone and level setter for a class, and can provide a range of identification figures for the student. One of the pressing reasons for using and studying film is that the student needs to develop good habits of perception, analysis, judgment, and selectivity for the processing of visual data. Given the popularity of film and the power of the medium, we need to become far more sophisticated in our use of its power and just as concerned about raising the level of our students' sophistication in response to film as we are regarding their sophistication in response to literature. Mastering a visual vocabulary in order to accurately perceive visual images is as important as mastering a verbal vocabulary in order to understand prose. (LL)

P 34

National Council of Teachers of English
Annual Convention, 1971

Perspectives: 10:45 a.m. - 12:00 noon

November 26, 1971

Las Vegas, Nevada

Ted Johnson
Oak Park-River Forest High School
Oak Park, Illinois 60302
201 North Decatur Ave.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Using Film in the Classroom

The year is 1971 and the subject for our session is listed under a very matter-of-fact label, "Using Film in the Classroom." The assignment for the speakers would, therefore, seem to be a straight forward one, to consider some dos and don'ts for the use of film in the classroom. Yet, there are reasons to be concerned about identifying a common and useful perspective from which to consider the subject.

Where are we in 1971? We are 40 years beyond the first rush to film in the secondary school. But that rush lost steam quickly, and the film vogue declined in the same decade of its origin. We are 25 years beyond the point in time at which distinctly, deliberately and allegedly educational films began to assume the status of legitimate aids to teaching and learning and the term audio-visual aids became important. The term audio-visual was still hyphenated in those days, but the classic books in this new field came off the presses and an audio-visual establishment began to work its way into the larger structure of the whole educational establishment.

We are also six years beyond the enactment and original funding of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a law intended to implement the decision of the Congress that, among other things, millions of federal dollars should be devoted to expanding and stimulating the use of instructional materials, including film.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPY-
RIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ted Johnson

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING
UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL IN-
STITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRO-
DUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM RE-
QUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT
OWNER.

ED 085759

05 200 9855

Many years before, Congress had given federal priorities to the making of better farmers, homemakers and workers. A few years before, Congress had provided federal funding to send the troops of science and the foreign languages to the barricades to defend us against Sputnik, communism, moral decay and the Russian language. But not until 1965 did Congress decide that federal priorities should also be assigned to media, both print and non-print. We no longer hyphenate audio-visual, audio-visual aids has been branded a non-term to be purged from the lexicon of educationese, we now have large libraries of educational films, we now use non-educational films as well as educational ones for educational purposes, and our latest thrust is for the making of films by students.

The point of this brief historical review is to raise the following questions: Where are we with film today? What can we properly assume as we consider the role of film in our schools, and what would be a useful perspective for me to use as today I ask you to consider selected parts of our film story? One choice could be to focus exclusively on the most dynamic of the newest trends, film making by students. A second choice could be to define a course in film and argue that it does belong in the English department. A third choice could be to deal with film as a powerful, dynamic and vital medium in a post-literate society. A fourth choice could be to concentrate on the nuts and bolts of our use, abuse and neglect of film as a liberating phenomenon.

My decision has been instead to take a broad view of film in the classroom and attempt to provide an overview of the current status and

problems of the why, what, how, where and who of film. Hopefully, this overview will focus and frame a perspective which can have a common usefulness. The primary reason for my choice is the fact that one of the things we have not done well with film is to analyze, organize and develop our understanding of the medium. Much of the energy which could be used to provide greater coherence, discipline and validity to our use of film is instead squandered in arguments over the respectability of film, imperial struggles between librarians and audiovisual people, and a frenzied pursuit of ill-defined creativity in film making. While some teachers are designing whole courses in film, other teachers are still deciding whether they should learn to operate a motion picture projector. While some school systems are pursuing the new media standards agreed upon by the American Library Association and the National Education Association, others are deciding whether or not to install screens and curtains in classrooms. While some teachers are carefully mining the riches stored on film, others are using movies to cover additional coffee breaks, provide easy Mondays or improve the chances for survival on days before holidays.

Because of the inadequacies and culture gaps in our professional uses of film, because of the significance of film as a medium of communication and understanding, and because we seem recently to have reached another new plateau in our advocacy and use of film, there should be merit in our standing back together to look at the whole classroom film scene in terms of unity and needs. If my explication misses the mark of relevance for your experience and needs, please pardon my poor aim, but please also consider the fact that our group

too is probably diverse rather than uniform in its experience with and attitudes toward film. In part because of this diversity, we need to give greater attention to the broad unity of the uses of film and not be quite so eager to grind our individual axes and advocate our personal schemes for salvation.

A common dictionary definition for film reads "a flexible cellulose material covered with a substance sensitive to light and used in taking photographs." Such a definition is obvious enough, but still useful to remind us that the film we use is not always a combination of pictures, sound and motion. Motion pictures do require specific attention and are unique, but the film we use in the classroom also includes filmstrips - silent and sound, slides, and cartridge films as well as black and white and color motion pictures. One is tempted to deal also with audio and video tapes as well as transparencies when considering film, but such media do raise different questions. My concern may seem to be exclusively with the film which is a combination of pictures, sounds, and motions on film, but my assumptions and conclusions generally apply equally well to all forms of film being used, abused or neglected in classrooms.

Film is also defined as a "thin veil, haze or blur, as over the eyes." Unfortunately, looking at the whole record of our arguments and experience, one cannot help but wonder if such is not actually a more appropriate definition of film as it is used by a significant number of enthusiasts and incidental or casual users. Film can be an avenue to greater understanding and communication, but it is also a package which can so divert or cloud our vision as to mislead or deceive.

Why do we use film? More than ten years ago Jerome Bruner presented a very succinct and stimulating report on the process of education in American schools. In the final pages of that brief report, he neatly covered nearly all the bases used to answer the why question about film and other audiovisual materials. Even though he wrote these pages in a day when audio-visual aids was still a professional and hyphenated term, his analysis retains its validity today and stands in sharp contrast with the all too typically inane literature in the field.

Bruner first considered the attention-getting quality of film. As such a device, film can help use and develop attention. As such a device, film may also produce passive students perpetually waiting for some sort of curtain to go up. This issue is particularly relevant in an entertainment-oriented, mass-communication culture where passivity and spectatorship are dangers. But Bruner concluded this point by identifying a challenge for us in the use of film: "Perhaps it is in the technique of arousing attention in school that first steps can be taken to establish that active autonomy of attention that is the antithesis of the spectator's passivity."

Bruner next identifies film as one of the "devices for vicarious experience." Experiences not normally available to the student in his school experience or in even his "real" experience can be given to the student as vicarious though direct experience of events. Such experiences and materials can be properly labeled as enrichment, provided in so doing we do not attempt to diminish their significance. Enrichment is, after all, a principal objective of education.

As examples of film as a dramatizing device, Bruner notes "the historical novel that is true in spirit to its subject, the nature film that dramatizes the struggle of a species in its habitat, the exemplification of an experiment executed by a dramatic personality, exposure to greatness in government by a documentary on the life and service of a Winston Churchill -- all these can have the dramatic effect of leading the student to identify more closely with a phenomenon or an idea."

Bruner then considered film as a device which when genuinely integrated into a course can help to set the tone and level of the course. His principal example is from the science rather than the English department, but the relevance can be translated by each of us. Specifically, the example is the Physical Science Study Committee film set. Bruner quotes a report by Stephen White of the PSSC which covers a great many of the most pertinent points: "The second condition that every film must meet -- that of setting level and tone -- may well be the most important contribution that the film medium can make. By directing attention to the important questions and the important problems, the film can help assure that all the great mass of fact and concept and theory and application that constitute any field of knowledge will fall into a coherent pattern in which the more important aspects will be clearly differentiated from the trivial. This is most difficult to achieve with the printed word; on film it can be accomplished at times with a gesture. Beyond meeting these two conditions, PSSC attempts in each film to make other substantial contributions to the learning process. Each film shows a real scientist in action, presenting him not as a disembodied intellect but as a normal, active, occasionally fallible human being, dealing vigorously and respectfully with real problems and deriving not

only satisfaction but at times excitement from the intellectual pursuit in which he is engaged. It is in this implicit fashion that the films attempt to elucidate the nature of scientists and of the scientific life.... The films are scrupulously honest. Experiments that are seen on the screen were carefully performed and are accurately reported. The temptation to use the legerdemain inherent in film processes has been steadily resisted, and in those rare cases where it is used to produce a desirable effect, the student is told explicitly how it is used and why."

Bruner's final point as to the why of film is that of expanding the range of identification figures -- models of greatness -- for the student. The teacher has a function as an identification figure, and it is no doubt easy for each one of us to recall how this function has been exercised by our own teachers. But the teacher cannot fulfill this entire function alone, and film is one of the most effective and convenient devices for helping in this task.

Bruner's list deals with film as a supporting device, clearly not something that determines the purpose of the lesson or the course. With the exception of the film study course per se, it is difficult to fault Bruner's discussion either for omission or commission. Yet, there is a point in Bruner's discussion which has become progressively more important and worthy of added emphasis and special consideration. Ours is often called a total-information culture. Our creation, publication and distribution of information is incredible in volume in terms of any comparison we care to make. Increasingly our flow of information is being dominated by the image. Whether we consider politics, economics, religion, education or the realm of the individual person, we have to recognize the increasing role and the documented impact of the image.

One of the pressing reasons we are obliged to use and study with film as well as study film itself is that we need to help our students develop good habits of perception, analysis, judgement and selectivity for the processing of visual data. Or as John Culkin describes it with more color in his essay "Films Deliver": "We have to organize a posse to outnumber and surround the vidiots in our midst and replace them with seeing-eye children."

Our students see 20 films for every one book they read. Perhaps this is another indication that we are, as many contend in a popular terminology, in a post-literate world. I personally doubt that this label is anything more than cute or a misuse of the word literate, but the fact remains that our students have many film experiences. Our obligation is to do far more than lament how few books they read. Confronted with the popularity of film and the power of this medium, we need to become far more sophisticated in our use of its power and just as concerned about raising the level of our student's sophistication in response to film as we are regarding their sophistication with literature.

We recognize the role of literature in helping adolescents find their identities. We also assume we can help them master and interpret literature, that we can help them see into it the better to see themselves. Should we not treat film with the same seriousness in purpose and planning? One of the reasons film has such an impact on our students is that it is an emotional and sensuous medium. Its interaction with students, adolescents who are frequently emotionally and sensorily deprived, is exceptionally powerful. Among other things, this means our students need to understand film so as to avoid being exploited by those who have mastered it. Using the words of Sister Bede Sullivan

"They need some help in reading the language of film so that they can decide whether it is (in a specific case) a comment on life, or an escape from it."

There are, then significant reasons why we should be serious, disciplined and artful in our use of film both as a means of studying other things and as an object of study in itself. Particularly given the remarkable combination of fraud, sophistication and power in the contemporary revolution in communication, we need to generate a marked increase in our sophistication with film.

What, then, is film? Our use of film began within the limits of the concept of audiovisual aids. Film was first something that could help us be more effective as teachers or in the use of other materials which film could support. In recent years our concept of film has been broadened appreciably and we are beginning to work with it both as an audiovisual aid and as a distinct art form. In this matter too, we are moving slowly as a profession. But then, why should we change our track record? While some are concentrating on improving our use of film in both of these roles, a great many of us are still wasting resources by belittling film, putting it down as a barbarous instrument of the devil assaulting the pristine beauty of literature, real academic stuff, or by becoming so enraptured with film that we babble ridiculous utterances about the obsolescence of books.

Our record with film as an audiovisual aid is moderately good. Our use of film in this function may even be better than is the general level of the films alleged to be pertinent to the field of English. We have begun to ignore the hopelessly dull and pedantic films which

dominated the scene just a few years ago. We have made progress in discrediting the notion that a great work of literature can be transformed into a film by pointing a camera at the book. We have in other words raised our level of expectations and our level of respect for film. We do expect our friends the publishers to practice art rather than pedantry in creating films for our use, whether the subject be punctuation or the nature of man. And we are beginning to distinguish between films which are aids to instruction and those which are expressions of an art form with an autonomous existence.

Our record with film as an art is the more dynamic part of our current experience with film. Seemingly a sizeable number of high schools are offering units or full courses on film, and in a number of instances these are conducted within the English departments. Certainly, whether we study film per se or not, we should be able to use film art to study man as a social animal, as a creative being, as a problem laden creature, and as an individual in search of an identity. We neglect a major avenue of insight into life and man if we neglect film in our study of the arts. Certainly literature and film are separated by the elements of their respective individual identities. Certainly a rationale can be constructed and defended for assigning the study of film art to a group other than the English department. But at the same time, the links between film and literature are real enough and the opportunities for benefits through the study of film are great enough to prompt us to be eager about incorporating both the study of film and film for study in the English curriculum. We would do well to remember Shaw's dictum that "short of torture, nothing teaches like art."

One of our reasons for dealing with film should be the development of a visual vocabulary. The combination of sound, motion and pictures which is possible on film is more than simply the sum of these three parts. Seeing is neither more nor less natural than speaking or reading. Thus, the perception of visual images depends on the deliberate mastery of a visual vocabulary just as the perception of prose depends on the mastery of a verbal vocabulary.

In using film we have distinct types from which to choose. Documentaries, what John Grierson calls "the creative use of actuality", can be used for many of the same reasons we have our students study different kinds of report and editorial writing. They are also excellent devices with which we can compare and contrast the work and problems of the artist with those of the historian.

One of the most stimulating types of films now in vogue is the short, poetic impression film. These have been appearing in increasing numbers in recent years and are some of the best examples of creativity with film. A particularly good example of this type is the film portrayal of the Ambrose Bierce story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge".

With the feature length (Whatever length that is!) film of narrative or dramatic form, we have some special problems. We have long used Hollywood's pictures of some of the classics of literature. Typically we have selected only the better productions from Hollywood, muttered half-hearted apologies for departures from the original form of the story, and noted that at least the film helps the kids "get a picture of the book." Unfortunately, that may not be much of a contribution. The problem is a failure of discrimination. On the one hand, Hollywood too often failed (You will note I speak of Hollywood in the past tense.)

to discriminate in terms of quality and integrity. On the other hand, there has also often been a failure to discriminate between the medium of literature and that of film. No work of literature can be exactly reproduced in film and vice versa, nor should it be. Film and literature are two different and unique art forms. We mislead ourselves and our students if we consider it meaningful criticism to note that a film does not follow the book. If we use film on a comparative basis with literature, we should recognize we are making a comparative study and proceed accordingly. To illustrate with a current example, consider One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. The film is remarkably faithful to the story of the book. (I intend no judgement of quality in using the terms remarkable or faithful.) Yet, the communication is quite different in each form. The major thrust of the film's message is distinctly different from that of the book. Examples of the same point abound, not the least of which is the Maurice Evans and Judith Anderson Hamlet which is grinding to immortality in our projectors. We should perceive and expect much more in films drawn from literature than mere picture making of books.

There are other film types, of course, and one of the other important ones is the explicitly instructional film. Perhaps all that need be said here about this type is to urge continuing prayers for the further improvement of the quality of these films.

Films made by our students also belong in our program of study. Creating their own films can help students get a frame on life in a number of ways. The process of film making can increase their awareness of the environment, the people, places and things around them. It gives them an additional opportunity to make a personal response to phenomena.

Film making can also increase the student's awareness of his own identity. We need not feel hopelessly hidebound or irrelevant if film making is not in our curriculum, but we should appreciate the worthy opportunities the process offers. The records of those schools which have made strides with student film making clearly document the fact that a lack of funds for cameras and film does not constitute an insurmountable barrier to this new offering. If faculty support exists, the students will solve the problem of equipment and supplies themselves.

While considering the what of film, it might be worth noting what is happening to the numbers of our film forms. In the period 1966-70 the rate of acquisition and the dollars devoted to black and white motion pictures and silent filmstrips have declined. During the same period our rate of acquisition of color motion pictures, cartridge films, sound filmstrips and 2 by 2 slides has increased. The proportion of dollars devoted to color motion pictures has declined, that for cartridge films and sound filmstrips has increased and that for 2 by 2 slides has remained stable. There would seem to be no surprises in these statistics, but even as confirmation the data can help us assess the movement in our own schools.

How are films best used? Simply put we should show them, discuss them, teach about them and make them. Discussing them cannot be overemphasized given the recognized impact of film. If we are using artfully constructed films, they are saying something significant. We should mine these resources, and doing so takes more than the query, "Are there any questions?", after the film has been presented. How often do you stop a film, repeat a film, use only part of a film or compare a film? Even more important, do you deliberately discriminate

between films used as audiovisual aids and those studied as art? We need discrimination to avoid murdering to dissect film just as surely as we do to avoid this evil in working with literature. We need to avoid packaged views of films or tidy recipes for film discussions and find ways to ask our students, "What did you SEE? Our approach to the discussion of film as art should, in other words, be a problematic one, and here we seem to face a special problem today. In our rush to film art, confused by current discussions of relevance and haunted by an intimidating specter of creativity, we have permitted torrents of meaningless words to pass as discussion of film. In embarrassing quantity we have written enough drivel about the POW and BANG of film to deny nearly all the principles of communication with which we deal in the English curriculum. We ought to be able to deal with film as art, respond to the special requirements of creativity in this form, and deal with respect with the insights and expressions of our students without denying the standards of communication or the substantive eloquence of the English language. "Like WOW" is noncommunication no matter how you slice it.

It should be unnecessary in 1971 to think about mechanical problems with projectors, screens, shades, ventilation and room size. Unfortunately, it is also a depressing experience to recount the horror stories of how we constrain and destroy the art of the film by using the wrong equipment and spaces to transmit film to people. It is far too depressing a topic to be reviewed in the shadow of the magisterial aegis of the NCTE.

In the instances where we decide to develop a major study of film as art we have a number of options available to us. The film study courses which do exist in our English departments are using a number of different patterns for their courses of study. Ample material and interest are available for an historical path of study. A sociological or a psychological path offers opportunities for interdisciplinary work in an essentially contemporary study. Two paths of special pertinence for an English meeting are comparative and thematic. Comparing film art to literature or other arts offers the chance to better understand both forms and thus gain maximum growth or other benefit from them. A thematic approach offers so much room for choice as to make choosing the only problem. Film might also be studied as an educational medium, but it is unlikely such an approach would gain great popularity at the high school level. Finally, at least on this brief list, film can be studied in terms of creativity much as we study creative writing. Many of the same limits, problems, advantages and opportunities apply to both.

Where are films best used? Our session topic suggests the classroom is the place. But is it the only place? Certainly it should not be. Individual students and students in groups smaller than classes should have access to the use of film resources. While a majority have not yet been so changed, our libraries should be converted to multi-media centers. Individual students are not dependent upon our lesson plans for access to books, neither should they be for film. We should expect and demand that our librarians be media generalists responsible for providing comprehensive media services to both students and teachers.

We should expect and demand that our libraries be reorganized to make access to all media forms as efficient and as effective as possible. In a few schools and colleges, experimental programs are being conducted with the goal of developing automated systems for the storage and distribution of non-print media, but the results are not yet appropriate for mass use. We do have the half-way steps of cartridge films and self-loading 16mm projectors and related devices, but these constitute only partial solutions to the mechanical problems of access to film and related media. Still, within the confines of existing technology, there is much more we can do to make film a more available resource if we decide to get serious about using it and in helping our students achieve a level of sophistication in their responses to the medium.

Film is an exciting and stimulating medium for our classrooms. But then what medium that communicates more about the world, man and society is not if we are interested in it? Film can be as honest, valid and substantive as any other of the media we employ. Our problem or deficiency is not with the nature of the media, whether film or others. Our problem is with our own creativity and inertia. The question of whether we should use film extensively has long since ceased to be a question. The question now concerns the level of discipline and integrity at which we will use film.